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ABSTRACT

The paper describes three activities designed to enhance the self concept of mentally retarded students and build a positive classroom climate. Listed are 21 techniques for building self concepts, including encouraging overlearning and accepting limitations. (CL)

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AFFECTIVE EDUCATION: GROWTH GAMES FOR
THE MENTALLY RETARDED

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June 25-July 1, 1978

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AFFECTIVE EDUCATION: GROWTH GAMES FOR THE MENTALLY RETARDED

According to Carl Rogers (1947), behavior can best be understood when viewed from the individual's own frame of reference. All behavior results from the individual's interaction with his environment and particularly with others. As the individual perceives these other's evaluations of himself, the individual develops an organized, dynamic sense of self. The sense of self molds his behavior and perception. Thus the child who is convinced that he is stupid will tend to act stupid in all situations.

The term "self concept" has come to designate the sum total of all characteristics attributed to oneself, including the positive and negative values which are attached to them. Self concept is based upon one's beliefs and attitudes concerning the self. It can actually determine who you are, what you can do, and what you can become. Self concept is learned, not inherited, through the accumulation of information about ourselves and our world. As educators, it is important to examine the way in which the self develops and the role which self concept plays in the learning experience. Educators must keep in mind that they can function as a change agent although slowly, over a long period of time.

Learning itself is the result of a risk-taking situation, somewhat like that of a poker game or any other gambling situation. In every learning situation we encounter, we are taking a risk. For example, when a paper is turned in, it is evaluated; a recitation may be laughed at; the work we do at the board may be wrong; a creative attempt will be judged. In each situation, we are risking error, judgement, disapproval, censure, rejection, punishment, or in some cases even ridicule. Looking at it from a deeper level, we are risking our self concepts.

Self concept is well formed by the time a child reaches school age. Reactions to learning situations, to failure and success in school, and to the physical, social, and emotional climate of the classroom will be determined by the beliefs and attitudes the child has about himself.

Imagine that your self concept is a stack of poker chips. Some of you enter into a learning game with a lot of chips, some with very few. The students with the higher number of chips have a great advantage. They can sustain losses when they fail on a learning task. Those with fewer chips will be more cautious -- more reluctant to risk in the learning experience. Students who have had a great deal of success in the past will be more likely to risk success again. If they fail, their self concepts can afford. These students whose histories have been predominated by failure will be reluctant to risk failure again. One solution to the problem might be to make each learning step small enough so that the student is not required to risk so much. But what is more obvious is the effect of building up the students supply of chips. Self concept building should be viewed in this way -- making certain that each student has enough chips to stay in the game.

The population of mentally retarded individuals have particular difficulty in developing positive and yet realistic self concepts. Sears (1940) found that failure for the mentally retarded tends to breed unrealistically high or low levels of aspiration. Some educable mentally retarded individuals feel impatient even though they are quite capable of considerable productivity and self-direction. For many professionals it is even more difficult to help a child realize the unreality of extremely high aspirations.

Many retarded children who come from rejecting or unstable homes, for example, cling desperately to the belief that they are loved by their parents, but their denial of reality takes its toll in the building up of tension and as a causation of behavior problems. Ringness (1961) compared normal, superior and mentally retarded fourth grade age children on the reality of their estimate of achievement in eight areas: success in learning arithmetic, success in English, spelling and writing, success in reading, acceptance by peers, acceptance by adults, success in sports, leadership of peers, and intelligence. Ringness was able to draw the following conclusions:

1. Mentally retarded children tended to over-estimate the level of success of others.
2. Those children identified as superior rated themselves more highly than the normal and the retarded, in that order.
3. Mentally retarded children displayed concepts which were less realistic than the other groups.
4. The measures of self-estimate varied with regard to sex, intelligence, and the situation.
5. Mentally retarded children proved to be less reliable on self-ratings than normal and superior students.

Because the retarded child usually has had great difficulty in mastering the ordinary tasks set by his family and by society, he tends to develop an unrealistic picture of himself. Therefore, it is of great necessity for educators to ensure that self concept building is included not only as a part of the curriculum but also as an integral part of the entire program. Techniques for building the self concept of children with low self esteem include:

1. Set goals to insure success
2. Reward often and early at first
3. Reinforce successful trials after failure
4. Avoid overpraise - be genuine
5. Try providing nonsocial reinforcement initially
6. Focus on working hard and trying
7. Consider using programmed materials at first
8. Encourage overlearning -- averts terminal errors and may prevent backsliding and discouragement
9. Make the subject matter relevant to the learner
10. Provide a nonthreatening environment
11. Encourage the learner to be active in the learning process
12. Environment conducive to honest and open interaction
13. Encourage intellectual and feeling levels of interaction

14. Promotes feelings of acceptance
15. Encourages cooperative, positive relationships
16. Encourages self evaluation
17. Creates atmosphere of trust
18. Is flexible
19. Plans activities with children
20. Accepts limitations
21. Values the child for who he is

We are now going to work through three experiences which can be used with your students to enhance self concept and build a positive classroom climate. The first exercise is designed to develop an environment of trust and support -- to give you the feeling that it is safe to explore and interact. The second exercise is designed to assist students in accepting their present reality. And the final exercise is devoted to how we relate to others.

Exercise 1: On your ten small pieces of paper write ten words which you feel describe you. The words must either be adjectives, adverbs, or verbs. Now rank order the ten words, making the first word the one by which you would prefer to be described and the tenth by which you would least like to be described. Share your work images with another participant. Then have your partner tell another pair something about their you.

Exercise 2: Now in a group of 5 or 6 we will focus our attention on one person. The remainder of the group will bombard him/her with all the strengths they see. The person being bombarded must remain silent. One member of the group should act as the recorder. Remember no "put down" statements are allowed. When you have listed 15 strengths discuss how you each felt giving and receiving positive feedback.

Exercise 3: For our final exercise -- the car wash, let's form two parallel lines. (Form the lines.) The first person in the east line will walk between the lines. As each person moved through the lines, the rest of us will touch him/her and say words of praise and affection. The pats on the back, hand-shaking, and verbal support produce a sparkling, shiny, happy "car" at the end of the wash.

Discussion of activity

How did you feel after receiving all that positive reinforcement? Do you feel like your stack of chips has grown?

Of course, in your own classroom you would not utilize such intense training. Changing the self concept is a slow process. You may want to incorporate similar activities on a daily, weekly, or only on a rainy day or special event.

Discuss the activities contained on Worksheets I and II.

WORKSHEET I

Identify two examples through which a handicapped child's self concept may be negatively influenced by each of the groups of individuals listed (give concrete examples of experiences you have witnessed).

- A. Teachers
- B. Parents
- C. Peers
- D. Persons in the school or community

How could each of the above situations be altered to provide a positive influence?

- A. Teachers
- B. Parents
- C. Peers
- D. Persons in the school or community

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WORKSHEET II

Think about the "best" student you have ever had in your classroom. Select a specific person, not just general impressions. Write that person's first name in the blank at the top of the first box. List the words or phrases which describe this student.

Repeat this procedure for the "worst" student, the "average" student, and the "handicapped" student.

Best Student

Name _____

Worst Student

Name _____

Average Student

Name _____

Handicapped Student

Name _____

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